

TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE

The Woman Who Loved Insects

Suzanne Kamata

Izumi had spent an hour waxing poetic about dragonflies. She'd told her students how they could migrate on gossamer wings across oceans, and how the males had a row of spines on their front legs just for cleaning their eyes. She told them how dragonflies formed a heart as they mated in mid-air, and how they symbolized pure water to the Navajo. In Japan, of course, they represented happiness. Now, she stepped into her office and went to the window. She peered out, trying to find some dragonflies flitting through the warm afternoon air.

Students milled about in the courtyard, sipping cold canned tea and punching out text messages on their cell phones. She could easily pick out the ones engaged in mating dances – the girls who giggled from behind their hands and glanced up from under fringes, the boys who affected indifference but flexed their muscles all the same. And this was odd – a lone foreign man sitting on a bench with a book. He was too old to be a student. Perhaps he was a visiting professor whom she hadn't yet met. He'd probably turn up at a faculty meeting.

Izumi leaned out the window and took a deep breath. It was getting to be her favorite time of the year. Soon the air would be buzzing with the sound of insects. Crickets would chirp. Bees would hum. Mosquitoes and cicadas would add to the orchestral mix.

Ahh, summer! Izumi glanced over to the calendar on the wall. She had blocked out a week for a trip to the mountains where she hoped to find a rhinoceros beetle for her studies. These days you could just walk into a department store and buy a stag beetle or a *kuwagata* – you could order them on the Internet! – but how could you learn about the creatures' habits from that?

No, there was nothing like tramping through the woods, net propped against her shoulder, the scent of pine and grass filling her nostrils. Sometimes she invited students along. It was a joy to watch the faces of those who shared her passion when they finally found a black-lacquered beetle clinging to the bark of a sawtooth oak. On occasion, she'd made the mistake of inviting the less enthusiastic, the posers, who slapped away at flies and gnats as they hiked, grumbling all the while.

Someday, Izumi would bring her own daughter into the mountains to search for insects. Maybe they'd go on a bug safari to Brazil to hunt down the magnificent Hercules, the largest beetle of all, or to the Congo Gorilla Forest in pursuit of the Goliath beetle.

'Chirrup! Chirrup!' Izumi reached into her totebag and fished out her cell phone. She could tell with a glance that it was her mother.

Moshi moshi.

'Izumi-chan, we have found the perfect man for you!'

Izumi rolled her eyes. 'Is that so?' How many times had her mother called, claiming the exact same thing?

She remembered the last time this had happened. The matchmaker had arranged a meeting in the lobby of a fashionable hotel. Beforehand, she coached Izumi in how to dress and what to say. Following the older woman's instructions, Izumi had worn her best silk dress, a simple light blue sleeveless sheath with a matching jacket. She had put on make-up and styled her hair, and then gone with her mother and the matchmaker to the hotel.

Her date, a serious-looking young man with cropped hair and black-rimmed glasses, was already waiting with his mother. His conservative navy suit was probably in accordance with the

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matchmaker's instructions as well. Looking at this nondescript specimen, Izumi couldn't help thinking of the insect world where males attracted mates with flash and color.

They'd bowed to each other and mumbled introductions, but they hadn't exchanged name cards. 'No *meishi*,' the matchmaker had warned. 'And no talking about bugs!' Here, she had shuddered. 'Wait until he has been taken in by your charms. Maybe on the third date, you could mention your ... special interest.'

Izumi had nodded. This was her fifth date, and not one had gone beyond the first meeting. She was afraid that the matchmaker was about to give up on her. She'd vowed to keep an open mind. So, sitting on the plush sofa, she'd politely sipped coffee, nibbled cake, and chatted with this man and his mother. His name was Taro.

They talked about the weather, about the taste of the cake, the painting of Mt. Fuji on the wall. They struggled to find some common ground. Finally, Taro said, 'I've heard you are a teacher. What is it that you teach?'

Izumi looked over at the matchmaker, who was shaking her head ever so slightly. '*Dame!*' she mouthed. No!

'Science,' Izumi said, and before she could stop herself, added, 'The science of insects.'

The matchmaker dropped her head into her hands, but Taro perked up. 'Really? I'm interested in insects myself!'

And then they'd talked for almost thirty minutes about the habits of various six-legged creatures while their mothers kept checking their watches.

'Perhaps we'll go off and leave you two to get to know each other better,' the matchmaker said during a break in the conversation. The mothers made their exit and Taro and Izumi ordered another cup of coffee.

Now that they were alone, they could discuss whatever they wanted. Izumi shook a packet of sugar into her cup and leaned forward. 'I'm told that you have your own company. May I ask what kind of business you run?'

Taro had hesitated for just a moment. He glanced at the empty cushion beside him and remembered that the matchmaker was no longer monitoring their conversation. He puffed his chest up and declared, 'I'm an exterminator.'

Naturally, the matchmaker and her mother had been a bit mystified when Izumi had declined a second date. After all, when they'd left, the two had been getting along so well.

For a while, her mother had been so exasperated that she'd left her alone. But now here she was, calling again.

'The matchmaker said that this man has a great job with a high salary and he's very handsome. You'll be having dinner with him Saturday night.'

'Fine.' She had no plans other than watering her plants and trimming her toenails. To tell the truth, she was hoping that just once, one of these perfect men would live up to his billing. She truly did want to get married and start a family. After all, without a husband, how would the little girl of her daydreams come into being?

'Don't forget,' her mother said. 'Don't tell him about your, er, interest in bugs.'

'I won't.'

Throughout her girlhood, Izumi's mother had nudged her toward piano, ballet and tea ceremony. Nothing, however, had captivated her as much as the six-legged creatures she found in the field. On Girl's Day, she had helped her mother to set up the tiers of kimono-clad dolls representing the Emperor and Empress and court, but she had always been impatient to stow them away again.

‘I need to put my ant farm here,’ she’d said. The dolls didn’t move, but the ants were endlessly industrious. She loved watching the worker ants as they tunneled, carrying bits of food twenty times greater in weight than their tiny glossy bodies.

Izumi and Haruki, her Saturday night date, exchanged a few text messages, and set up a meeting. They were modern people; they didn’t need to be chaperoned by parents or the matchmaker. They arranged to meet in front of a popular Italian restaurant.

Izumi told him that she would be wearing a red dress with black dots – her ladybug dress. He told her that he would be holding a rose – a bit of a cliché, but he would be easy to find.

On Saturday night, she donned the silk dress which reminded her of worms munching mulberry leaves, made up her face, and took a taxi to the restaurant. Several people were milling about the entrance, but she spotted him right away. He was taller than the others. His hair was a little long and pulled back into a stubby ponytail. She liked the hair immediately, and the cricket-black leather jacket that he wore. He was obviously different from the guys she usually encountered, who always arrived in suits and ties.

‘Izumi-san,’ he said, bowing slightly, as she came near. ‘Your dress is lovely.’

‘Thank you,’ she said, accepting the rose he held out to her. She brought it to her nose.

‘And here is another gift,’ he said, handing over a small package.

Izumi couldn’t help thinking of praying mantises. During courtship, the male presented the female with a ‘nuptial gift,’ a morsel of food. If the female did not find it to her liking, she was apt to devour her suitor.

‘Shall we?’ Haruki ushered her into the restaurant.

They were shown to a back booth, dimly lit by a wall sconce. It was all very romantic, Izumi thought, and the scent of garlic and basil from the kitchen made her mouth water.

At the table, Izumi opened her gift. It was a thin, cotton handkerchief printed with a profusion of purple blossoms. Hydrangea, Izumi thought. She could just about hear bees buzzing around the summer flower. The gift was lovely, but useful. Also, it was not so expensive as to make her feel any obligation.

‘How perfect!’ she said.

They ordered plates of spaghetti and a bottle of wine.

‘Please tell me, what it is you do again?’ Izumi asked, twirling noodles on her fork.

‘I design computer software,’ Haruki said. ‘I have my own company. And you? I heard you’re a science teacher?’

‘A professor,’ Izumi said. She couldn’t help herself. She was pleased to note, however, that he didn’t bat an eyelid. Emboldened, she decided to tell him more. ‘I teach courses in Entymology.’

‘Ahh, the study of insects,’ he said, pouring more wine into her glass. ‘I had a kuwagata beetle when I was a boy. I remember brushing its back to get rid of the mites. It lived for almost three years.’

‘I had a kuwagata, too,’ Izumi said excitedly. ‘And a lot of other bugs. One time, my ant farm spilled out all over the tatami. My mother was furious.’

They both laughed.

This was the best date she’d ever been on. Haruki was successful, handsome, and interesting. And he wasn’t afraid of smart women, or women who loved bugs. Izumi allowed herself a brief fantasy of a second date, an engagement, a wedding. She saw them on their honeymoon in a rain forest, tracking down exotic species.

But then, Haruki accidentally dropped his cloth napkin. Instead of calling the waiter for a new one, he leaned down to pick it up.

‘Arghhhh!’ He jerked back and pulled his feet up onto the banquet.

‘What is it?’ Izumi thought he was having a heart attack

‘Waiter!’

Some nearby diners looked over in alarm as a waiter rushed to their table. With a trembling finger, Haruki pointed under the table. ‘Th-there’s a c-c-cockroach!’

Izumi sighed.

The following Monday, she sat at her desk and drew the handkerchief out of her purse. She used it to pat her hands dry after washing them, but the thin cotton was unabsorbent and so it wasn’t even a particularly useful gift. It was simply pretty. She remembered a recent article about nuptial gifts. She grabbed the latest copy of *Insects of the World* and flipped through the pages till she found it. Ah, yes:

In experiments reported this week, researchers Natasha LeBas and Leon Hockham from the University of St. Andrews removed the valuable (i.e., edible) nuptial gift that male empidid dance flies normally provide their female partner and replaced the gift with either a large edible gift or an inedible cotton ball token that resembles tokens given by other empidid fly species. The researchers found that although pairs copulated longest after presentation of a large edible gift, the females receiving the worthless cotton ball token were sufficiently tricked to allow males to copulate for as long as when the males provided a small nutritious gift. Males who substitute highly visible, but easily obtainable and worthless gifts may thus be able to invade a population of genuine gift-giving males.

The research demonstrates that, at least in some cases, females are susceptible to the invasion of so-called male cheating behavior, and it suggests that the evolution of worthless gift-giving may arise through males’ sensory exploitation of female preferences for nutritious gifts.

Izumi shuddered a little. She had almost been taken in like the female empidid dance fly. She had almost fallen for a piece of worthless cloth.

Her mother called. ‘Izumi-chan, the poor man thinks you won’t go out with him again because he took you to a dirty restaurant.’

‘Okaasan, how can I think of marrying a man who is afraid of cockroaches? Did you know, by the way, that a cockroach can survive for up to nine days without its head? Or that they have teeth in their stomach?’

‘I’m about ready to give up on you,’ her mother said. I guess I’ll never have any grandchildren. Our bloodline will disappear with you.’

Here’s another interesting fact. During the war in Vietnam, the U.S. Army used cockroaches to root out guerillas. They sprinkled the guerillas’ hideouts with synthetic roach pheromones and then made suspects walk past cages in which there were male roaches. Then they watched to see how the insects reacted.’

‘I’m hanging up now, Izumi. I hope you will consider giving that nice young man a second chance.’

Click.

She paced her office a few times, trying to dispel her irritation. A fly had somehow become trapped in her office and now bumped against the window glass. She swiftly moved to set it free.

The fly zoomed out, and the plaintive sound of insect legs rubbing together wound its way into the room. Or no, not an insect. A violin. The same foreign man she'd seen before was sitting on the bench in the courtyard, but this time he was wielding a bow.

Maybe I'll just go say hello, Izumi thought. The man seemed lonely. Perhaps he didn't have any friends.

She locked her office and trotted down the stairs. He looked up when she appeared. His eyes, behind the thick lenses of his glasses, were protuberant, but he had a nice smile and a head of thick dark curls. She felt something sizzle between them. Pheromones, no doubt.

'Hello. I'm Dr. Izumi Tanaka, Professor of Entymology,' she said in English, holding out her hand.

'Greg Samsa.' His fingers closed around hers. 'I used to be in sales, but I'm more of a bug man myself.'

'You're not American.' She moved to sit down beside him, slowly, so he wouldn't scare and scuttle away.

'No. I'm from Prague. I'm afraid I don't speak much Japanese.'

'Well, if you need someone to show you around...'

'Thank you.' He rested the violin on his knee. 'Actually, would you happen to know of any good climbing walls nearby?'

Her heartbeat quickened. 'I'll find one and let you know. Where can I reach you?'

They chatted a bit more, then she went back to her office to do a web search. She found several climbing walls within driving distance. If he didn't have a car, she would offer to drive him herself.

As it turned out, Greg had the use of an aging hatchback discarded by a fellow professor. He invited Izumi to join him, and promised to pick her up at her apartment.

She dressed in sneakers and lycra, thought about applying fake eyelashes, then decided not to. Greg seemed like someone who'd prefer the natural look. In the mirror, she noted that her cheeks were flushed, her pupils dilated. As a scientist, she understood that attraction was a chemical reaction. Desire was transformative.

A buzz indicated Greg's arrival. Izumi rushed to open the door.

'Hello,' he said. 'This is for you.' In the bowl of his hand was an apple.

'Oh!' She might have expected flowers or cake, but not this. She picked it up by its stem, noted the small bruise at the bottom of the fruit, and brought it to her mouth. Her eyes sought out Greg's behind his glasses as her teeth punctured the skin. She didn't bother to wipe away the juice that ran down her chin. She imagined his tongue shooting out like a proboscis, licking the sweetness from her skin, but he didn't touch her. Not yet.

'Shall we go?'

Later, after she had marveled at the way Greg moved from hold to hold, clinging to the wall as if his fingers had hooks, she made a preemptive call to her mother. 'I met someone,' she said.

'Oh, that's wonderful!'

Izumi could imagine her flapping her apron in delight.

'Tell me about him! Where is he from? What does he do?'

'He's a professor,' Izumi began.

'That's perfect!' No doubt she was already planning the wedding and pondering names for grandchildren.

'And he's Czech.'

Her mother did not reply. She had not been prepared for a foreigner. Izumi suspected that she would eventually come around, however. She was desperate for her daughter to settle down. A Caucasian would be better than no man at all.

The next few months were a whirlwind of climbing and concerts. They went to movies (foreign, with subtitles), and had dinner in elegant restaurants. At night, Izumi dreamed of their limbs forming a heart in mid-air.

In mid-summer, when the semester had finally ended, Greg invited her to go on a picnic.

‘I’ll prepare rice balls,’ Izumi promised in a rare moment of behavior that her mother would deem gender-appropriate.

‘I’ll bring the nectar,’ Greg rejoined. ‘Shall we take the tram?’

This is it, Izumi thought. He’s going to ask me to marry him.

They met at the station. Izumi carried their lunch in a wrapping cloth. Greg had a backpack with a blanket and a bottle of wine tucked inside. When he saw her, he held out his hand. They stepped onto the tram together.

Izumi was hardly aware of the city as it flashed by. She ignored the other passengers, fixating on Greg instead. She couldn’t help herself; the pheromones were so powerful.

The scent of diesel and garbage gave way to that of grass and cedar. The horizon was smudged with green. When they finally reached their stop, they descended into a field of wildflowers. A forest was just beyond. As they walked toward the trees, the flowers seemed to grow taller and taller until they were past Izumi’s knees, past her waist, past her chest. She still gripped Greg’s hand, but it felt different somehow. His fingers had narrowed and lengthened. When she turned to look at his face, she suddenly saw him as if through a kaleidoscope.

‘Are you ready?’ His voice when it came to her was not English or Japanese or any language that she’d known until now, but she understood him completely.

‘Yes,’ she replied.

She felt the tickle of grass on her toes, and then her feet were no longer touching the ground. As she rose above her shoes, now as large as ships, now growing ever smaller, she reminded herself that desire is transformative. Catching a draft of air, she glided toward the sun. Gregor was right beside her.

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